



A Family Guide

For Selecting Quality Early Learning Programs





A Message to Families

Choose Wisely

Choosing an early learning program for your child is one of the most important and difficult decisions you will ever make. This brochure is designed to help you make choices about quality programs so you can find the best match for you and your child.

An early learning program's environment provides the experiences your child needs to learn new skills and to develop socially. Look for a positive and caring relationship between teachers and children. Make sure the teacher is someone you can comfortably communicate with and you can trust. When you walk into the facility, the atmosphere should be cheerful and safe. The children should be having fun and the program should include experiences and activities you consider important. Above all, you want to choose a program where your child will be safe and happy--and where your ideas about parenting will be supported.

Be a Smart Shopper

Use this information to help you decide if a program is a good fit for you and your child. The teachers should be caring, qualified, and well organized. The facility should display a current license. Read the rules and policies about fees, meals, discipline, illness, and emergencies. Ask the staff about their views on how children develop and about the daily activities they organize for the children. Walk around all areas within the program and be certain that you like the facility and will be happy with your child's entire experience within the program.

Do Your Research

It is a good idea to visit at least three early learning programs for at least 30 minutes. If possible, bring your child with you on the visits and feel free to ask questions. Visit for a second time on another day and use the Quality Checklist for guidance on what to look for during your visit.

Make an Informed Decision

Like any parent, you want a program that will keep your child healthy, safe, and happy. Before making a final decision, check the state's child care licensing web site www.myflorida.com/childcare for inspection information about any licensed program you are considering.

Using Child Care Resource and Referral Services

All families can receive free help in researching and selecting programs that best meet their needs. Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) is a free service provided by your local early learning coalition. Trained staff can answer your questions about choosing the best early learning program for your family and provide you with referrals to programs that are customized to your preferences. They can also offer you referrals and information about other services available in your community. Help is available by phone call 1-866-357-3239 (TTY:711), in person, via e-mail or on-line visit www.flready.com.

Inclusive Early Learning Programs

An inclusive early learning program is one in which children with disabilities or special health care needs grow and learn physically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially alongside children without disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits most early learning programs from discriminating against children with disabilities. A quality inclusive early learning program will exhibit all of the requirements listed for other program types. In addition, parents of children with disabilities should look for a program that meets the individual needs of their child and their family. Visit www.flready.com to find services in your community, or call the CCR&R Network Office at 1-866-357-3239 (TTY:711).

A "Perfect" Match: Your children and their child care setting

Children have different ways of interacting with others. How does your child like to spend time and how does he or she act? Match your child's temperament with the style of an early learning program. Remember, there is no right or wrong temperament or personality. Understanding your child's activity level and personality will help you find the best early learning program.

In thinking about your child's temperament, which describes your child most of the time?

Adaptable/outgoing

- Flexible
- At ease in new surroundings/with new people
- Good with transitions

Look for a large group setting that provides social opportunities and new experiences.

Cautious/slow to warm up

- Thoughtful
- Cautious in new surroundings/with new people
- Needs time for transitions

Look for a small group setting that is less overwhelming.

Feisty/Energetic

- Passionate, exhibits strong emotions
- Has difficulty controlling feelings
- Impatient and demanding

Look for a program where each child has a primary teacher, someone who knows and understands your child.

How does he/she respond to the world?

Big/Enthusiastic Responders

- Expresses feelings and does not hold back

Look for a teacher who respects your child's emotions, but helps him/her to express them in a more appropriate manner.

Low/Subdued/Quiet Responders

- Plays quietly, fusses very little

Look for a teacher who introduces new activities in a gentle manner.

How active is your child?

High Activity Level

- Always on the go
- Explores with body movements

Look for a program that offers one-on-one attention, ways to explore safely, and many physical activities.

Low Activity Level

- Sits quietly
- Explores through his/her eyes and ears

Look for a teacher who engages the child in activities that appeal to senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, and sound).

How social is your child?

Very Social

- Enjoys meeting new people
- Is happiest when interacting with others

Look for a program that can create opportunities where children play in groups.

Less Social

- Generally shy and reserved around strangers
- Needs extra time to feel comfortable with new people

Look for a program/teacher that allows the child to become comfortable at his/her own pace.

How does your child deal with change?

Very Tolerant

- Is not disturbed by changes
- Is highly adaptable
- Copes very well with frustration

Look for programs with mixed-age groups that offer frequent challenges and high stimulation.

Less Tolerant

- Is very sensitive to change
- Gets upset when daily routine is disrupted
- Is easily frustrated and bothered by change

Look for programs with same-age groups that have consistent routines that support your child's independence.

Consider your child's unique needs

- Sleeping habits/routine
- Cultural identity
- Special needs/disabilities

Adapted from Child Care Aware "How to find quality child care in your community."



Early Learning Centers

Licensed or License-Exempt Centers

Early learning centers may be licensed or license-exempt and are usually located in spaces adapted for early learning purposes. These include stand-alone centers and those located in businesses, apartment complexes, universities, public schools, hospitals, and faith-based facilities. Prekindergarten programs (both school-based and non school-based), Head Start programs, on-site employee early learning centers, and faith-based centers are some of the types of centers that are available.

Licensed Centers

Licensed centers must pass an initial inspection to ensure that all licensing standards have been met. Licensed centers are also re-inspected to follow-up on health and safety standards. To meet the standards these centers must:

- Meet physical facility requirements
- Follow health, safety, and nutrition guidelines
- Maintain enrollment and attendance records
- Allow parents/guardians access to their children at all times
- Comply with annual inspection schedules
- Meet staff and director training requirements
- Conduct screening and background checks of all employees/teachers
- Document current immunization records and physical examinations for all children in care
- Comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and make reasonable accommodations for children with special needs

Religious Exempt Centers

Some religious centers are exempt from child care licensing. These centers must be an integral part of a church or faith-based school, and must:

- Be accredited by, or a member of, a state-recognized accrediting body

- Comply with federal background screening requirements check
- Meet local governing requirements for city/county health and safety regulations
- Maintain enrollment and attendance records
- Maintain current certification of CPR and First Aid
- Comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and make reasonable accommodations for children with special needs

Adult-to-Child Ratios

Ratios represent the number of children that one adult may supervise for each age group. Ratios are regulated by the Florida Department of Children and Families.

- Birth to 12 months (1:4)
- 12-24 months (1:6)
- 2 year-old children (1:11)
- 3 year-old children (1:15)
- 4-5-year-old children (1:20)
- 4-year-olds in Voluntary Prekindergarten programs (which is regulated by local early learning coalitions) (1:10)
- 5 years of age or older (1:25)

Family Child Care Homes

Family child care takes place in a person's home for children from unrelated families. Group size may vary according to family child care provider preferences. Ages of children may often be mixed, although some providers serve only a specific age group (such as infants, toddlers, or preschoolers). Different requirements apply to different programs, with some family child care homes being licensed and some registered.

Registered Family Child Care Homes

The providers are required to meet minimal state requirements, such as:

- Registering annually with the Department of Children and Families
- Completing and providing to parents/guardians an annual health and safety home inspection checklist
- Providing proof of substitute care
- Providing proof of background checks for all adults in the household
- Documenting current immunization records of children on file
- Completing the family child care course prior to caring for children
- Completing additional hours of training annually
- Completing specific training in early literacy and language development

Note: Standards for care for registered homes that participate in the School Readiness program are regulated by local early learning coalitions.

Licensed Family Child Care Homes

Licensed providers must meet all requirements listed for registration and must meet the following licensing requirements regulated by Department of Children and Families:

- Following health, safety, and nutrition guidelines
- Maintaining enrollment and attendance records
- Complying with licensing standards of local and state governments

- Maintaining a current certification of infant and child CPR and First Aid
- Passing an inspection prior to receiving a child care operating license
- Complying with two routine and one renewal licensing inspections annually
- Complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act and making reasonable accommodations for children with special needs

Note: Some counties may have more restrictive requirements than those mandated by the state.

Adult-to-Child Ratios

Family child care homes are regulated by the State of Florida, Department of Children and Families. A family child care provider may care for one of the following groups of children, including the provider's own children younger than age 13 years of age:

- Birth to 12 months of age (1:4)
- No more than three are under 12 months (1:6)
- No more than two are under 12 months of age; or all ten can be school-age
- Two adults for every twelve children for large family child care homes with no more than four children under 24 months of age



Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Education Program

VPK builds a strong educational foundation for four-year-old children so they are prepared with the skills that lead to reading and writing. The early learning programs that offer VPK have to make sure their staff and programs meet high quality expectations. The program's curriculum must be effective and the size of their classes allow the teachers to build close relationships with the children through direct instruction.

Every four-year-old in Florida can attend a free preschool program that offers VPK. Parents may select a 540 hour school year program or a 300 hour summer program.

VPK Highlights

- High quality educational program with a focus on early literacy skills
- FREE for all children who live in Florida and are four years old on or before September 1st of the program year

Program Options

Parents may select one program for their child:

- **VPK School Year Program**
– 540 instructional hours OR
- **VPK Summer Program**
– 300 instructional hours during summer

Providers

- All VPK providers must meet high standards required by Florida law
- Parents can choose the provider that meets their own family's needs
- Options for parents include: public schools, private centers and licensed family child care homes

Instructors

- All VPK instructors must have at the minimum a Child Development Associate (CDA) for the school year program or a bachelor's degree for the summer program
- Ratio is one teacher to 10 children, and class size cannot exceed 18 children

Curriculum

- Must be developmentally appropriate and focused on early literacy skills
- Must prepare the child to be ready for kindergarten based on standards adopted by the State Board of Education

Readiness Rates

- The Florida Department of Education/State Board of Education calculates a kindergarten readiness rate annually for VPK Providers that are private or public schools and that offer either the school year (540-hour) or summer (300-hour) program
- The Readiness Rate measures how well a VPK provider prepares four-year-olds to be ready for kindergarten based upon Florida's VPK Education Standards
- The Readiness Rate serves as an additional piece of information that families may use to determine if a VPK program is best suited for their family

Transportation

- Parents are responsible for their child's transportation to and from the VPK program

Early Learning Coalitions

Your local early learning coalition has information including application procedures and dates to apply in your county. For local contact information visit the Agency for Workforce Innovation's Office of Early Learning web site at www.flready.com or call toll free at: 1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711)

How to Apply:

- Contact the local early learning coalition to find out the process and locations for registration
- Bring proof of Florida residency for verification and other documents that prove the age of your child
- Take to the VPK program of your choice the certificate of eligibility that you will receive after registration

School-Age Care

Licensed or License-Exempt

A school-age child is one who is at least five years old by September 1 and who is attending kindergarten through fifth grade. A school-age program is a licensed or license-exempt program that serves only school-age children. The setting for a school-age program may be a public or private school, private center, family child care home, faith-based facility, or community/recreation program. School-age programs may be open before and after school as well as full days during teacher planning days, spring, winter, and summer breaks.

Licensed Programs

Must pass inspections to ensure that all standards required by statute are met, including:

- Meet physical facility requirements
- Follow health, safety, and nutrition guidelines
- Maintain enrollment and attendance records
- Allow parents access to their children in care at all times
- Comply with annual inspection schedules
- Receive 45 hours of training initially, plus a minimum of 10 hours annually thereafter
- Submit screening and background checks of all employees/caregivers
- Comply with a ratio of one adult for twenty-five children
- Have a supervisor/director who holds an Administrator's Credential (multi-site supervision at school-age child care programs is permitted)

License-Exempt Programs

The following programs are exempt from school-age care licensure, but must meet city/county health and safety regulations (exempt programs are not government inspected):

- Public schools and non-public schools and their integral programs
- Summer camps that have children in full-time residence
- Summer day camps
- Programs that are an integral part of a faith-based school
- Religious education programs conducted during vacation periods
- Operators of temporary establishments (e.g., hurricane shelters)

Note: Some counties may have more restrictive requirements than those mandated by the state.



Unregulated Care

Care that does not require licensure or regulated inspections by the state.

Informal Care

Informal care takes place in a person's home where one adult cares for children from only one family. The person is often a relative, neighbor, and/or friend. This type of care has no state guidelines or inspections. Informal providers may qualify to participate in the School Readiness program (see Financial Resources for all types of care under the Resources for Families tab of this brochure) after completion of a three-hour health and safety course and by meeting early learning coalition requirements.

Au Pair/Nanny Care

Au pairs provide families with intercultural, individualized, live-in child care. Most au pairs are a member of an international Au pair organization, which is regulated by the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Exchange Visitor Program. Nannies may also be hired by families locally to care for the children of one family and may live in or out of the family's home.

Summer Camps & Recreational Programs

Summer camps operate only during school year summer breaks. Summer care is provided for children in kindergarten and above; adult/child ratios vary. This type of care requires no state inspections. Personnel other than owners/operators are not required to be fingerprinted but must comply with all other screening requirements.



Membership Organizations

Not-for-profit programs associated with or certified by national organizations are not considered early learning facilities; therefore, personnel are not subject to the Department of Children and Families' screenings. Examples of these organizations are the YMCA and the Boys and Girls Club and are frequently after school programs.

Resort/Hotel Care

Resort/hotel care establishments provide care solely for guests. All staff caring for children must be screened.



Resources to Assist Families

Financial Resources

School Readiness Program

The School Readiness program prepares children to become ready for school, and provides parents with information on child development and other topics of interest. The School Readiness program offers financial assistance to income eligible families to help pay for childcare.

The School Readiness Program

- Provides income eligible families the resources to find and pay for quality child care for their children
- Promotes parental choice in choosing a child care program and allows working parents to make their own decisions that best suit their family's needs
- Provides education to parents to help them make informed choices about child care and early learning
- Enhances the quality and increases the availability of child care for all families
- Prepares children for kindergarten and continued educational success

Families can apply in a few simple steps:

1. Call the Agency for Workforce Innovation's Office of Early Learning Call Center at 1-866-357-3239 (TTY: 711) or go to the website: www.flready.com to make sure that your child can participate
2. Ask for a School Readiness application or complete it on-line at the following website: <https://spe.schoolreadiness.org/pe/>
3. If you are eligible and funding is available, you will be contacted by your local early learning coalition

Services Available through the School Readiness Program:

Developmental Screening and Referrals

At the time of enrollment in the School Readiness program each child is provided a developmental screening to make sure that he/she is on the right developmental path. If any concerns are found the child will receive referrals to specific health and educational specialists.

These services also work along with other programs for young children such as Head Start, Early Head Start, the Voluntary Prekindergarten program (VPK) and local public school districts.

Around the Clock Care

These services include extended-day, extended-year and school-age care for children to support parents in becoming financially self-sufficient.

Head Start

Head Start is a comprehensive preschool program which provides, health, nutrition, and family support services for eligible three- and four-year-olds prior to kindergarten, and is funded by the federal government. Early Head Start is a comprehensive program for pregnant women and infants from birth to age three. There are no costs to families who meet the eligibility criteria. There are Head Start programs in all 67 counties in Florida, and Early Head Start programs in 42 counties. Contact your local early learning coalition, the Head Start program, the Office of Early Learning and/or your local Child Care Resource & Referral office.

Family Resources

2-1-1

National, state, and local information and referral service that provides information and referrals for human services such as crisis intervention services, support groups and financial assistance.

Dial 211

www.211.org

Agency for Workforce Innovation's Office of Early Learning

Provides state-level support and direction for early learning professionals. By providing guidance, support, and oversight to community early learning coalitions, the Agency for Workforce Innovation helps children be successful in school and in life.

(850) 921-3180 or 1-866-357-3239

(Toll-free), (TTY: 711)

www.flready.com

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

General ADA information is available including answers to specific technical questions, free ADA materials, and information about filing a complaint.

1-800-514-0301 (Toll-free)

1-800-514-0383 (TTY)

www.ada.gov

Child Care Aware

A non-profit initiative committed to helping parents find the best information on locating quality programs and resources in their local community; maintains links to resource and referral agencies in every state.

1-800-424-2246 (Toll-free)

www.childcareaware.org

Child Care Resource and Referral Network (CCR&R)

Offers support to local early learning coalitions; helps families, child care providers and communities choose and plan for quality child care; offers information about community resources.

1-866-357-3239 (Toll-free)

Child Help USA® National Child Abuse Hotline

This hotline is staffed 24 hours daily with professional crisis counselors who utilize a database of thousands of resources.

1-800-4-A-Child, or 1-800-422-4453 (Toll-free)

www.childhelp.org

Cultural Care Au Pair

An exchange program that offers families flexible, live-in child care with a unique international perspective.

1-800-333-6056 (Toll-free)

www.culturalcare.com

Department of Children & Families (DCF) Licensing Website

Statutorily responsible for the administration of child care licensing and training throughout Florida. This program regulates licensed child care facilities, licensed family child care homes, and licensed mildly ill child care facilities in 60 of the 67 counties in Florida. Licensing inspection reports may be viewed on this website.

www.myflorida.com/childcare

Department of Education

The Department of Education/Office of Early Learning (DOE/OEL) works in collaboration with the Agency for Workforce Innovation (AWI) and the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to implement the Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Education program.

1-866-447-1159 (Toll-free)

www.fldoe.org/earlylearning

Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)/ Dependent Care Tax Credit

A special tax benefit for working people who earn low or moderate incomes. The advanced EIC allows workers who qualify to receive a portion of their income tax refund in advance in each paycheck throughout the year. The Dependent Care Tax Credit enables parents to deduct eligible child care expenses from their annual income tax return. For additional information, request Publication 503 from the Internal Revenue Service.

1-800-TAX-1040 or 1-800-829-1040 (Toll-free)

www.irs.ustreas.gov

Florida Abuse Hotline

24-hour hotline that receives reports of abuse and exploitation of children, elderly, and adults with disabilities.

1-800-96-ABUSE or 1-800-962-2873 (Toll-free)

www.dcf.state.fl.us/abuse

Florida's Central Directory of Early Childhood Services

Provides information and referrals on disabilities and special health care needs for families, service coordinators, and other professionals who work with children with special needs. Offers referrals to the local Early Steps or FDLRS ChildFind in your area if you suspect your child may have a disability.

1-800-654-4440 (Toll-free)

www.centraldirectory.org

Florida Child Support Enforcement

Child support services that include locating missing parents, establishing legal paternity, and establishing, enforcing, and modifying support orders.

1-800-622-KIDS or 1-800-622-5437 (Toll-free)

www.myflorida.com/dor/childsupport/

Florida KidCare

Health insurance program for uninsured children younger than age 19. The Florida KidCare program assesses eligibility based on age and family income.

1-888-540-5437 (Toll-free)

(TTY: 1-877-316-8748)

www.floridakidcare.com

MyFlorida.com

Florida's Government Website

www.myflorida.com

National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA)

National network of more than 850 child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&Rs) located in every state and most communities across the US. CCR&R agencies help families, child care providers, and communities find, provide, and plan for affordable, quality child care.

1-703-341-4100

www.naccrra.org

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

Dedicated to improving the well-being of all young children, with particular focus on the quality of educational and developmental services for all children from birth through age eight.

1-800-424-2460 (Toll-free)

www.naeyc.org

Parents Anonymous

Nations' oldest child abuse prevention organization, dedicated to strengthening families and building caring communities that support safe and nurturing homes for all children.

1-909-621-6184

<http://www.parentsanonymous.org>

Parents Without Partners

Provides help to single parents through discussions, professional speakers, study groups, publications and social activities for families and adults.

1-800-637-7974 (Toll-free)

www.parentswithoutpartners.org

Voluntary Pre-kindergarten (VPK)

A free voluntary program designed to prepare four-year-olds for kindergarten and build the foundation for their educational success.

1-866-357-3239 (Toll-free)

www.flready.com

For more information contact:



Agency for Workforce Innovation/Office of Early Learning

107 East Madison Street

MSC 140

Tallahassee, FL 32399

www.flready.com or call toll free at: 1-866-357-3239

(1-866 FL READY)

(TTY: 711)